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SUBJECT: EXTENDED MEETING WITH PRESIDENT RAHMON DOMINATES CENTCOM COMMANDER'S VISIT TO TAJIKISTAN

CLASSIFIED BY: Tracey Jacobson, Ambassador, U.S. Embassy Dushanbe, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. In an unexpectedly long meeting with the Tajik President, which dominated Admiral Fallon's visit June 19, Emomali Rahmon hailed U.S.-Tajik relations as one of the first priorities in Tajik foreign policy and stated that Tajikistan is interested in further development of these relations on multiple fronts, including military and security relations. Rahmon stated that he was satisfied with the current level of military relations and thanked Admiral Fallon for the newly constructed bridge between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, which will open in August. The Centcom Commander lauded Rahmon's strong declaration of Tajikistan's continued independence, even while noting Tajikistan's special relationship with Russia. He especially recognized the multiple forces pulling on newly sovereign Tajikistan, emphasizing common approaches to problems in which Tajikistan and the United States have a mutual interest. Admiral Fallon thanked Rahmon for continued overflight rights and the stationing of French forces in Dushanbe and stated that he would like to see an increase in military educational programs.

¶2. (C) President Rahmon's main theme was the importance of resolving the Afghan conflict and supporting the weak Karzai government and all layers of Afghan society. At one time stating that Tajikistan was at the confluence of too many competing influences, Rahmon enumerated his open door policy, inclusive of all countries except for Uzbekistan. Obliquely referring to "other" countries, President Rahmon gave a sober assessment of how Russia would profit from expanded conflict in the Middle East. Rahmon strongly emphasized the utility of American-Iranian dialog in the settlement of security problems in the Middle East. President Rahmon concurred with Admiral Fallon's assertion that Central Asian countries should not let Russia dominate the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to advance its own ambitions. End summary.

Developing the personal relationship

¶3. (C) The Commander, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), Admiral

William Fallon, his foreign policy advisor Ambassador Richard Roth, Ambassador Jacobson and the Defense Attaché attended a two and one half hour meeting with Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, his Presidential Advisor on National Security Affairs, Erkin Rahmatolloyev, and his advisor on Legal Affairs, Zafar Aliev. After this meeting, Admiral Fallon and Ambassador Jacobson met for fifteen-minutes with the President alone. The Defense Minister was out of the country and so was unable to attend the meeting but the absence of any other uniformed military and security related officials was somewhat puzzling. Embassy concerns that the last minute inclusion of the Presidential Legal Advisor was in preparation for raising this past weekend's assault and medical evacuation of CENTCOM military personnel (REF Dushanbe 924) proved unfounded, as the Tajiks did not raise this issue.

¶4. (SBU) The meeting, originally scheduled for one hour, stretched to almost two-and-one half hours, an unexpected and positive sign of President Rahmon's willingness to engage with Admiral Fallon. President Rahmon praised his positive personal contacts with previous CENTCOM Commanders, Generals Abizaid and Franks, and emphasized that his relationship with them developed beyond mere acquaintances into actual friendships. Since Rahmon previously served in the Soviet Navy, both in the Far East and Black Sea fleets, he and Admiral Fallon found common ground in their mutual naval service, with both happy neither of them ended up in the submarine service. President Rahmon ensured Admiral Fallon that he was welcome in Tajikistan at any time, saying "just give us an hour's notice so we can set it up". Rahmon confirmed that he was ready to discuss any global or regional issue and would help in the resolution of problems wherever possible.

Afghanistan first and foremost

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¶5. (C) The most consistent theme in Rahmon's often impassioned appeals to Admiral Fallon was the importance of a stable Afghanistan for Tajikistan. President Rahmon exhorted Admiral Fallon several times in the course of the meeting to take further concrete steps to solve the Afghan conflict, stating that its resolution was the single best form of assistance that the United States could provide to support Tajikistan's sovereignty and development. Rahmon said that Tajikistan needed stability in Afghanistan, the same as humans need oxygen. In addition to building the effectiveness of the Afghan national army and improving the security situation against the Taliban, President Rahmon asked that CENTCOM assist in bolstering the reach and legitimacy of the weak Karzai government. The President added that no other viable leadership alternative was evident in Afghanistan. Rahmon also implored the CENTCOM Commander to commit the necessary resources for additional economic and social programs in support of all layers and factions of Afghan society, without which no enduring peace would be possible. Both President Rahmon and Admiral Fallon highlighted the significance of the forthcoming bridge opening between the two countries in furthering the economic prospects of both Tajikistan and Afghanistan, extending both south to the Pakistan coast and north to Kazakhstan and Russia. Rahmon also emotionally appealed to Admiral Fallon to influence Pakistan, where the Taliban was born, to cease its support for extremists and terrorists as a key to stabilizing Afghanistan.

Rahmon urges dialog with Iran

¶6. (C) The Tajik President welcomed the renewal of U.S.-Iranian dialog last month and urged continued, intensified dialog, without intermediaries, to resolve the problem in Iraq as well as other unresolved problems in the Middle East. Admiral Fallon cited the destabilizing role which the Iranians are playing both in Iraq and Afghanistan as especially troubling. Admiral Fallon

also expressed dissatisfaction with Iranian nuclear aspirations, to which President Rahmon did not specifically respond. Rahmon cited several previous visits to Iran, the most recent being in May 2007, in which he discussed numerous issues with President Ahmadinejad, including U.S.-Iranian relations. President Rahmon said his impression was that Ahmadinejad had changed his perspective and that he was ready for an expanded, step-by-step dialog with the United States, especially as it related to solving the Afghan and Iraq conflicts. Regarding Ahmadinejad, President Rahmon stated that dealing with the worst person in the world is a better alternative than war. President Rahmon appealed to Admiral Fallon, and claimed that he did the same with Ahmadinejad, to resolve all disputes through dialog, without intermediaries.

¶7. (C) Recalling that he conducted over 40 months of negotiations before arriving at a peace settlement in the Tajik civil war, Rahmon stated that dialog with Iran to clarify U.S. intentions would go a long way towards improving the situation both in Iraq and the greater Middle East. President Rahmon informed Admiral Fallon of Iran's open support of the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan during the Tajik civil war, claiming that Iran's eventual goal was to import its version of political Islam into Tajikistan. Rahmon claimed that he openly blamed Iran for its behavior and that it subsequently admitted its mistake and promised not to undertake such actions in the future. However Rahmon noted that Iran continues to support the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan today and that Tajikistan is taking its own (unspecified) actions on this issue.

Russia: beneficiary of conflict in Iran

¶8. (C) Rahmon claimed that Iranian-Russian relations are currently at a low point. Rahmon used the Russian proverb - appetite comes with eating - to describe a Russia that is currently awash in oil revenues and therefore more apt to take imperial approaches to world issues. Rahmon indirectly implied several times that "other" countries were benefiting from the

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current conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, and that expanded conflict in the Middle East, (comment: read a U.S. attack on Iran. End comment) would profit these same countries. President Rahmon highlighted a recent report in which the Russian media portrayed a map with detailed U.S. invasion plans for Iran. A widening of conflict in the Middle East would have the duel effects of lowering America's image in the world and significantly raising world oil prices. Rahmon noted that Tajikistan would also suffer from higher oil prices since they, unlike the other energy-rich countries in Central Asia, have no fossil-fuel reserves upon which to rely in a crisis.

¶9. (C) Later in the one-on-one session, the President was less elliptical about Russia than in the broader meeting, stating outright that "Russia does not want stability in Iran and Afghanistan. Lack of stability there means that Central Asians are forced to export north, and this is in Russia's interest. Russia would like to see a U.S. military attack on Iran, because it would prolong the instability, and double world oil prices." In response to Rahmon's assertions that Russia wanted to dominate and control Central Asia, Admiral Fallon said "this is one reason why the countries of Central Asia should not let Russia dominate the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and use it to advance its ambitions." Rahmon agreed, noting that the Central Asian Economic Community had ceased to have any real value since Uzbekistan insisted on inviting Russia. President Rahmon reemphasized Tajikistan's sovereignty with regard to negative Russian influence, citing Russian interference in Kyrgyzstan's affairs as a bad precedent.

¶10. (C) Rahmon also described "other" countries, in addition to Iran, who were supplying weapons that fueled the conflicts in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to supporting Shiites in Iraq, others were supporting the Sunnis in Iraq. Likewise the

Taliban in Afghanistan had supporters other than Pakistan as well. Rahmon suggested these countries were protecting their economic interests. By creating a buffer zone devoid of transportation or energy infrastructure, Central Asian countries are forced to look towards the north for their export options.

Open door policy, except for Uzbekistan

¶11. (C) In the context of other serious problems, which inhibit better cooperation amongst Central Asian countries, President Rahmon devoted significant time to Uzbekistan and the destabilizing effect of President Karimov, perhaps understating that their bilateral relations "are not very good." Nonetheless, after Admiral Fallon enumerated his other Central Asian visits, except Uzbekistan, Rahmon encouraged Admiral Fallon to also visit Uzbekistan on his next trip to the region. Admiral Fallon responded that several outstanding U.S.-Uzbek diplomatic issues prevented him from visiting Uzbekistan on this trip to Central and South Asia. Stating that Tajikistan has an open door policy and good relations with everyone except Uzbekistan, Rahmon outlined border conflicts including over 300 casualties from Uzbek-laid minefields, cross border attacks, and Karimov's obstructionism of Tajik hydropower development plans.

Rahmon also stated that Russia and China also frequently side with Uzbekistan in hindering Tajikistan's development of hydro power options. President Rahmon stated that he had studied President Karimov for more than fifteen years and found him to be extremely inconsistent. In response to Admiral Fallon's question about whether there are any alternatives to Karimov, Rahmon replied, "of course there are alternatives. Who could have predicted Berdimuhamedov would follow Saparmurat? But Karimov will never leave power as long as he lives. He is afraid." When Fallon asked whether there was anyone who could provide advice to Karimov, Rahmon said "he doesn't listen to anyone. He doesn't trust even those closest to him. He is sick."

Security and military relations

¶12. (C) In addition to countering terrorism, President Rahmon stated that stemming the flow of illegal narcotics was the biggest problem for Tajikistan. Rahmon said he was willing to

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take active steps using his military and security forces to combat both problems and appreciated any assistance that CENTCOM could render to any of these forces to fight on the front lines of these global threats. Rahmon stressed several times that he was extremely satisfied with the level of military cooperation, and that he hoped for an intensified relationship, especially in terms of material support. The President also highlighted CENTCOM training events as being very useful. President Rahmon specifically expressed his gratitude for the recent opening of two U.S.-sponsored border posts on the Tajik-Afghan border, stating that it was a valuable contribution in the fight against many of the transnational threats in Tajikistan and the region.

¶13. (C) Admiral Fallon stated his first priority was education, including specific military training such as officer and non-commissioned officer professional development and language skills, so that younger military servicemen have the opportunity to gain a wider understanding of the world and what options are available to them. Admiral Fallon challenged Rahmon to allow these young servicemen the opportunity to exercise leadership, which they are more than capable of handling. This education not only benefits the military forces but also society as a whole. Admiral Fallon expressly thanked President Rahmon for the provision of overflight rights and the stationing of French International Security Assistance Forces on Tajik soil, both of which are playing key roles in stabilizing Afghanistan.

¶14. (S//NF) Rahmon said his government had information about "our old militants" and extremists who were planning to move out of Pakistan across the Wakhan corridor through Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous region into the Fergana Valley, destination Osh, Kyrgyzstan. Admiral Fallon noted U.S. efforts to get the Pakistani government to act against these terrorists, which is why they're now looking at moving. Rahmon promised to provide specific information via the Ministry of State Security to the Defense Attaché. Admiral Fallon said he would welcome any specifics that would help him interdict these militants.

Rahmon: a vision for the future

¶15. (C) Rahmon's vision for the future included continuation on the path towards enlightened democracy, endorsed of course by a people's referendum, a continued open door foreign policy, and energy and economic independence from Uzbekistan and Russia to remove Tajikistan from the black hole in which it currently exists. In addition to the new southern route to South Asia facilitated by the U.S.-funded bridge, Rahmon mentioned plans for two new bridges to Afghanistan from Tajikistan's Shurobad and Farkhor regions. Rahmon also highlighted new lines of communication towards the east to China via the Kulma Pass, and to the north through Osh, Kyrgyzstan onward to Almaty, Kazakhstan, thereby avoiding Uzbekistan.

¶16. (C) Comments. Overall, the extended meeting demonstrated a very good first step in building the personal relationship between President Rahmon and Admiral Fallon necessary for CENTCOM to have influence and succeed in Tajikistan. Post welcomes Admiral Fallon's additional emphasis on military educational programs for Tajikistan, as we consider our educational and exchange programs to give the most valuable return on investment.

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